



**Testimony of the
American Association of University Women (AAUW) of Michigan
before the
Senate Education Committee
Senate Hearing Room, Ground Floor, Boji Tower
September 27, 2011**

Good afternoon. My name is Barbara Bonsignore and I am the Public Policy Director of AAUW of Michigan. I am representing the organization at this hearing and appreciate the opportunity to give testimony on the package of education reform bills that were first introduced on September 7, 2011.

AAUW of Michigan is a member of Michigan For Public Education, a coalition of groups and organizations in support of public education in the state. My remarks, however, are representative of positions held by AAUW of Michigan, based on the national AAUW Public Policy Program for 2011-2013 that was recently adopted at the AAUW Convention in Washington, DC.

By way of background explanation, AAUW is a membership organization founded in 1881. It has approximately 100,000 members and 1000 branches nationwide. This year, AAUW celebrates its 130-year history of breaking through barriers for women and girls. The organization continues its mission

through education, research, philanthropy and advocacy. AAUW of Michigan is the state component of the national organization with approximately 3,000 members and 42 branches throughout the state.

The 2011-2013 AAUW Public Policy Program states in its Biennial Action Priorities: *To support a strong system of public education that promotes gender fairness, equity, and diversity, AAUW advocates opposition to the use of public funds for nonpublic elementary and secondary education and to charter schools that do not adhere to the same civil rights and accountability standards as required of other public schools.*

Particularly in reference to SB 621, there appears to be an attempt to weaken public education by diverting public funds to private or religious elementary and secondary schools through various voucher-funding avenues. Education vouchers are generally defined as certificates for parents of students to use specifically to help finance the costs of attending a private or religious school instead of a community public school. Sometimes creatively referred to as scholarships, certificates, choice programs or tuition tax credits, these funding schemes are all in fact vouchers. AAUW stands firmly by the belief that the country should provide an excellent education for all children, not private school vouchers for a few.

It has been suggested, in previous testimony by other advocates, that requiring financially stressed districts to bear the burden of educating private school students, without allocating funding for those costs, will reintroduce the battle over vouchers that was most recently soundly defeated by the voters of Michigan in 2000. Documentation has been made available to the Senate

Education Committee members showing that voucher programs have failed to provide educational gains in places such as Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington D.C. where they have been tried over a number of years, and found not to be the solution to the problem of low-performing students.

Vouchers and tuition tax credits funnel public money into private schools. Vouchers are taxpayers' dollars spent according to the policies of a private school board, not the decisions of a democratically elected and publicly accessible school board. Private and religious schools are not required to meet basic accountability provisions, such as open meetings and records laws, or to publicly release test scores, dropout rates, and other basic information. Because private schools are not accountable to the public at large, taxpayers lose public oversight for the expenditure of their tax dollars. Additionally, AAUW remains concerned that school voucher schemes undermine accountability for academic achievement for girls—including Title IX, the landmark civil rights law that prohibits sex discrimination in education programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. From AAUW's perspective, regardless of the constitutionality of certain voucher programs, such schemes are not sound education policy.

A 2006 Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll found that 71 percent of Americans would prefer improving existing public schools over "finding an alternative to the existing public school system."

AAUW believes a strong, free public education system is the foundation of a democratic society and remains opposed to diverting public funds to private or religious elementary and secondary schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this very important subject that impacts students statewide.

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